

100 Years of Angus

For any business, 100 years of operation is a significant milestone. When it's a family farm that has raised Angus cattle for five generations, a 100th anniversary is an even more remarkable feat. But that's the historic accomplishment of Millers Viewlawn Herds.

Roy Miller began raising registered Angus cattle on the farm near Mabel, Minn., in 1903. Today, his great-grandson Larry Miller and Larry's son Chris carry on the family tradition of raising purebred Angus cattle on the same farm, which now includes 600 acres in Minnesota and 418 acres in Iowa. The Viewlawn herd, which consists of 240 cows, is the fourth-oldest Angus herd in existence in America and the second-oldest Angus herd in existence in Minnesota.

Making this story even more impressive is the fact that the farm itself has been in the family for 137 years — through seven generations of Millers.

Family history

The farm was founded in 1866 when Manoah and Mary Miller moved from New York state to Winneshiek County, Iowa, and purchased 160 acres of land. Those original 160 acres are still part of the farm today and have been passed down through seven generations by means of purchase or estate.

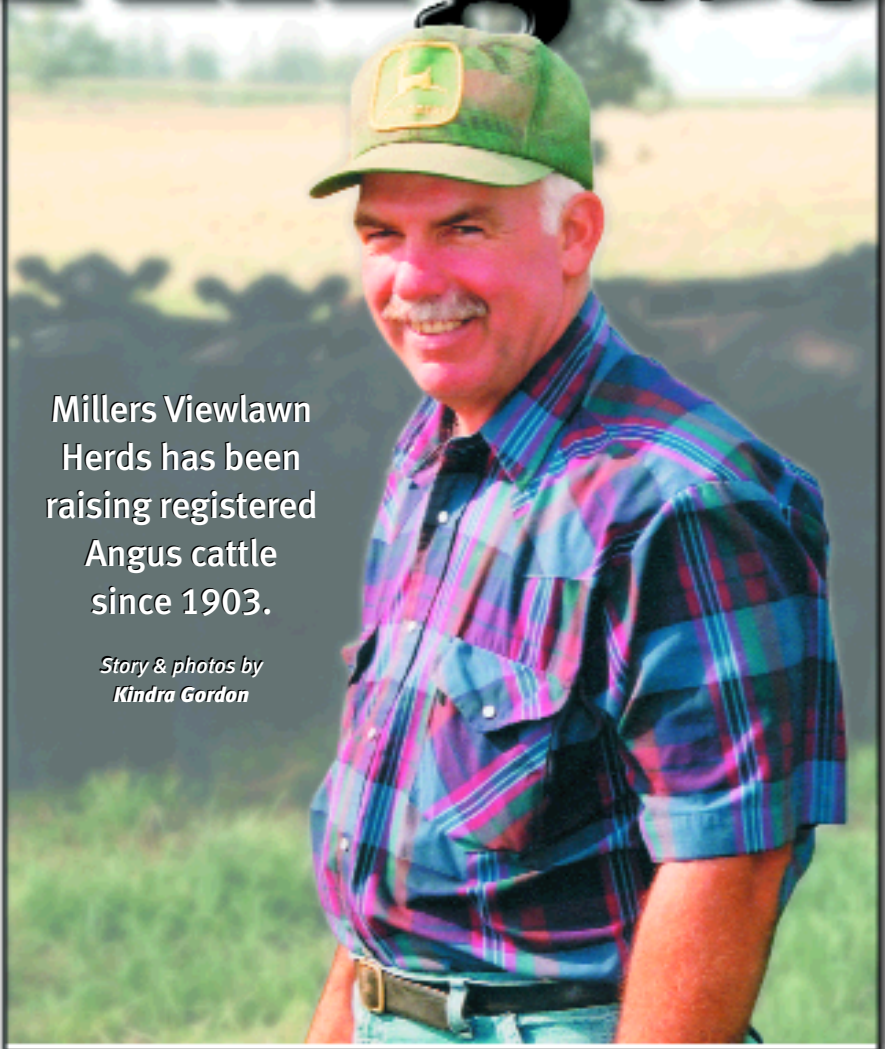
In 1877 Manoah's son Charles purchased the land. In 1892 Charles' son Roy began renting the farm. Roy is credited with raising the first Angus cattle on the farm and founding the Viewlawn Angus herd.

Roy raised commercial Angus until 1903 when he bought six bred, registered females from J.E. Briggs in Burr Oak, Iowa. These cattle originated from the Angus herds of M.C. Wilford of Canton, Minn., and John Milne of Prosper, Minn. A year later, Roy purchased two registered Angus from the herd of James Donald of Canton, Minn. Those eight head were the beginnings of the Viewlawn Angus herd. Over the years several herd sires were purchased from neighboring Sunny Slope Angus Farm, which is owned by Phil Abrahamson and is the oldest Angus herd in existence in Minnesota.

When asked why his great-grandfather started raising Angus genetics, Larry jokes, "Is there anything else?" He adds that Roy had raised commercial Angus for about 10 years before getting into the seedstock business, and they obviously did well for him.

"The Angus breed has treated all of us well over the years," Larry says.

The family tells that Roy also came up with the name for the farm. It's said that one day while in the pasture Roy noticed the smoke from the train that ran between the nearby towns of Cresco and Decorah, and he



Millers Viewlawn Herds has been raising registered Angus cattle since 1903.

*Story & photos by
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could see the top of the grain elevator. He is said to have remarked, "It's such a pleasant view from the lawn." Thus, he chose Viewlawn as the name for his Angus herd and farm.

Roy operated the farm for 35 years. He had three sons and two of them, Charles and Frank, were actively involved in the farm, but also held full-time jobs off the farm. In 1945, Charles' son Robert (Bob) also began working on the farm.

When Roy died in 1964, the farm was passed to his three sons, and Charles bought the farm from his brothers that same year. Charles then rented the farm to Bob, who

was active in Angus activities and served on the Board of Directors for the American Angus Association from 1976 to 1982. Bob's wife, Elaine, was considered the "pioneer woman at Viewlawn" and was instrumental in maintaining all of the cattle records as the operation expanded.

In the late 1970s Bob and Elaine's son Larry and his wife, Margaret, joined the Angus operation. The two families worked together for more than 20 years until both Bob and Elaine died in 1997.

Today, Larry is the sixth generation of Millers to run the farm, which now includes

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more than 1,000 acres of land. In addition to the 240 Angus cows, the Millers maintain a 60-head crossbred Suffolk flock and farrow-to-finish about 1,800 hogs each year.

Margaret works part-time off the farm, but is actively involved in all of the recordkeeping and book work. She is also credited with bringing the “computer age” to Viewlawn.

Larry and Margaret’s three sons — Mathew, Christopher and Andrew — have been an important part of the operation and have all been active in 4-H, FFA and state junior Angus activities. Son Chris returned to the farm full-time in 2002 after graduating from Hawkeye Community College in Waterloo, Iowa.

Customers are key

Larry credits his family’s long-standing history in the Angus breed to all of the customers who have purchased cattle from Viewlawn in its 100-year history.

“We owe our success to our customers,” he says. He reports that many customers at Viewlawn are third-, fourth- and even fifth-generation buyers. They have one family who bought cattle from Viewlawn back in 1906 who is still buying cattle from them today, Larry says.

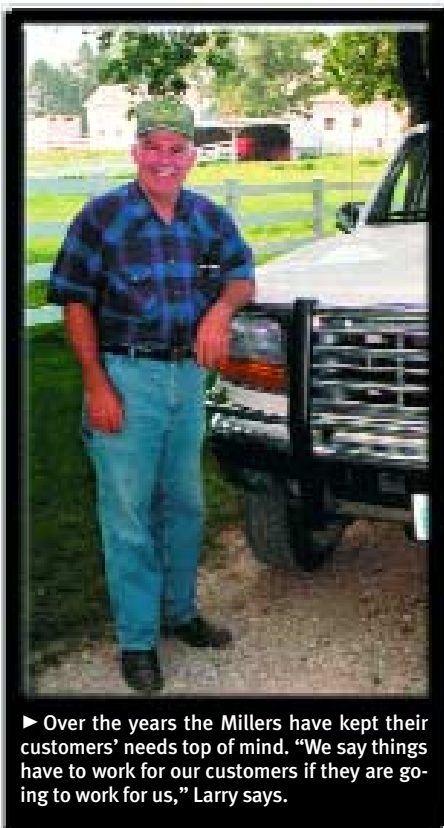
Over the years, the Millers have kept their customers’ needs top of mind. “We say things have to work for our customers if they are going to work for us,” Larry says.

That philosophy led the Millers to develop a closed herd starting in the 1960s when Bob took over the farm. Larry has continued that practice. On occasion, Bob and Larry have purchased females to go back into the herd, but those females were from dams raised at Viewlawn.

Larry says, “We are proud that every female on the farm was raised here. We believe that has put a lot of predictability and uniformity into our herd.”

Viewlawn’s breeding program focuses on linebreeding and on using many of their own bulls. “We are different from most purebred operations in that we only AI (artificially inseminate) about 20 head each year. Everything else is bred naturally with many of our own herd sires. This allows us to evaluate if it works here and if those cattle will work for our customers,” Larry says.

“We also do not do any individual matings. Records are kept on all of the calves, but the pedigrees on our cattle develop strictly by chance,” he adds. He explains that at breeding time, cows are split into various pastures, and a bull is



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put in with that cross-section of the herd. “We don’t look at records or pedigrees. If a pasture can hold 30 head, we just count and put a bull in with them.” Larry believes this process has also allowed them to develop a uniform herd.

Other criteria for selection include carcass traits and disposition. Since 1997 the Millers have used ultrasound measurements to assess carcass qualities of their herd. They also cull hard for disposition.

Their program has been successful, and in 2002 more than one-third of the Viewlawn herd qualified for Pathfinder status.

Today, private-treaty is the primary way cattle are marketed by Viewlawn. They sold

Centennial celebration

As part of their 100-year celebration, Millers Viewlawn Herds hosted the Minnesota State Junior Angus Show on the farm June 14. Larry and Margaret say, “With our son Chris returning to our farming operation in 2002, we were reminded how important our youth are. They are our future.”

On Sunday, June 15, much of the Viewlawn herd was on display at the farm. A complimentary noon meal was served and an overview was given about the farm history and pedigrees used over the years. A silent auction of many Viewlawn animals, including Pathfinder dams, concluded the day.

86 bulls last year and several groups of replacement females. Larry says at present this method works well for them and seems to fit their customers’ needs.

Over the years, the Miller families have consigned cattle to several shows and sales in Iowa and Minnesota and have also hosted a handful of production sales that were instrumental in offering Angus genetics to breeders across the nation.

Roy organized Viewlawn’s first bull sale, which was held in 1950 at Gordon, Neb. At the time, Roy recognized that Western ranchers were looking for good, rugged bulls and saw this as a means of marketing Viewlawn’s bulls. Fifteen bulls were offered that first year. The sales continued through the 1950s, and then in 1960 and 1961 Viewlawn held purebred Angus sales in Dillon, Mont.

During the 1950s Roy also offered foundation cows and heifers for sale by private treaty on the farm. Production and club calf sales were held on the farm in 1956, 1966, 1967 and 1968.

In total, the Millers report that they’ve sold Angus cattle to producers in 28 states and Canada. In 1965 and 1969 Viewlawn Angus females were also sold to Japan.

Looking ahead

Larry says their goals for the future are to maintain the herd and to keep doing what they’ve been doing. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” he jokes. “Hopefully, we can keep providing what our customers want.”

On the selection side, he says they’ll continue to seek out the best genetics available. “Trying to find different genetics or breeding that’ll work for us and our customers is a constant process. We look for cattle with about a frame size of seven and with capacity and depth of body. Our commercial customers want easy-keeping cattle with efficiency.”

Larry also recognizes that customers’ needs are changing on the service side. “More cattle producers have full-time off-farm jobs, so seedstock producers need to become more accommodating with weekend and evening sales and delivery of cattle. Those producers are also concerned about birth weights because they aren’t always on the farm when cows are calving.”

While the Millers have enjoyed raising Angus cattle, they say working with the people involved in the beef industry has by far been the most enjoyable aspect of

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“To do what our ancestors did, to love what we do, and to be able to work side by side with your family — what more could you ask for? My hope is that one or more of our sons will continue this tradition, will raise his family on the farm, and that we will have grandchildren showing Angus cattle. That would be the frosting on the cake,” she says.

Chris, who represents the seventh generation of Millers on the farm, says, “I’d like to thank my forefathers for what they

have established and passed down to me. It’s amazing how intelligent and insightful my grandfathers and father have been. I only hope to pass on the tradition and continue the excellence they have established. I want to utilize today’s technology and data to better our herd; yet I will never overlook their true cattlemen and Angus stewardship techniques. I will carry on the Miller tradition to the best of my ability.”



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